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Message Text

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S E C R E T STATE 229474

EXDIS FOR AMB YOUNG FROM UNA

FOLLOWING REPEAT DAMASCUS 5264, ACTION SECSTATE INFO AMMAN BAGHDAD BEIRUT CAIRO KUWAIT JERUSALEM JIDDA LONDON TEL AVIV 08 SEPT:

QUOTE S E C R E T DAMASCUS 05264

EXDIS

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV, SY
SUBJECT: DETERIORATING HEALTH OF PRESIDENT HAFEZ AL-ASSAD

1. MAHMOUD EL-YOUSSEF, TAPLINE REPRESENTATIVE IN DAMASCUS FOR THIRTY YEARS WHO HAS EXCELLENT CONTACTS AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF THE REGIME, STATES THAT PRESIDENT HAFEZ AL-ASSAD DOES INDEED HAVE LEUKEMIA, AS WELL AS DIABETES. YOUSSEF SAYS THAT SOVIET DOCTORS WHO ARE ATTENDING ASSAD ESTIMATE THAT HE HAS BETWEEN SIX MONTHS AND ONE YEAR TO LIVE. WHEN I COMMENTED TO YOUSSEF THAT RUMORS CONCERNING THE PRESIDENT'S BAD HEALTH HAD BEEN RECEIVED WITH SKEPTICISM
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IN SOME QUARTERS, YOUSSEF STATED THAT HE IS SURE OF HIS FACTS.

2. YOUSSEF INDICATED THAT TOP SYRIAN LEADERS ARE AWARE OF THE FOREGOING AND ARE TAKING STEPS TO ESTABLISH A PRESIDENTIAL COUNCIL WHICH WOULD AIM AT FACILITATING A SMOOTH TRANSITION FOLLOWING ASSAD'S DEATH. ACCORDING

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TO YOUSSEF, THE COUNCIL WOULD SELECT A SUCCESSOR AND
ENDEAVOR TO ASSURE AN ORDERLY TRANSFER OF POWER. HE
MENTIONED THE FOLLOWING FOUR INDIVIDUALS AS PROJECTED
KEY MEMBERS OF THIS COUNCIL: FOREIGN MINISTER KHADDDM,
CHIEF OF STAFF SHIHABI, MOHAMMED HAIDAR, MEMBER OF THE
NATIONAL COMMAND, AND KHULAYFAWI, FORMER PRIME MINISTER.

3. IN RESPONSE TO MY QUESTION AS TO WHO HE THOUGHT
WOULD BE ASSAD'S SUCCESSOR, YOUSSEF EXPRESSED THE VIEW
THAT MINISTER OF DEFENSE T'LASS WOULD BECOME A PRESI-
DENTIAL FIGUREHEAD BUT THAT THE POWER BEHIND THE SCENE
WOULD BE THE PRESIDENT'S BROTHER, RIF'AT AL-ASSAD.
YOUSSEF DID NOT THINK THAT UNDER THE NEW LEADERSHIP
SYRIAN POLICIES, EITHER DOMESTIC OR FOREIGN, WOULD
CHANGE APPRECIABLY. ONE POSSIBLE EXCEPTION MIGHT BE
A RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN SYRIA AND IRAQ. HE OBSERVED
THAT SYRIA'S FORMER "POOR" NOW CONSTITUTE THE "RICH"
IN THE FORM OF THE PARTY CADRE AND MILITARY OFFICER
CLASS. THIS GROUP HAS A VESTED INTEREST IN MAINTAINING
THE STATUS QUO.

4. DESPITE PLANNED EFFORTS BY SYRIAN LEADERS TO SMOOTH
THE WAY, YOUSSEF FORESAW A DANGEROUS VACUUM OCCURRING
IN THE WAKE OF ASSAD'S DEMISE.

5. COMMENT: WE ARE PREPARED TO ACCEPT THAT PRESIDENT
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AL-ASSAD PROBABLY HAS LEUKEMIA, SINCE THIS REPORT
IS SO WIDESPREAD IN AUTHORITATIVE CIRCLES. AT THE
SAME TIME, IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT THE FRG AMBASSADOR
TOLD ME THAT ASSAD REQUESTED NO MEDICAL CHECK-UPS
DURING HIS UPCOMING TRIP TO WEST GERMANY AND EXPRESSED
A DESIRE THAT HIS SCHEDULE BE A VERY FULL ONE. IN ANY
CASE, I WOULD BE RELUCTANT TO ACCEPT AT FACE VALUE
EL-YOUSSEF'S PROGNOSIS THAT ASSAD HAS ONLY SIX MONTHS
TO ONE YEAR TO LIVE. I GATHER THAT THERE HAVE BEEN
SOME BREAKTHROUGHS RE TREATMENT FOR THIS DISEASE
AND, IN ADDITION, WE MUST NOT OVERLOOK THE CAPACITY
OF STRONG AND DETERMINED LEADERS (SUCH AS BOURGUIBA,
KENYATTA AND KING SAUD) TO FIGHT THE ODDS AND PROLONG
THE INEVITABLE. OUR HUNCH IS THAT ASSAD WILL STILL BE
AROUND A YEAR FROM NOW. THE EMBASSY IS IN THE PROCESS
OF PREPARING AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPLICATIONS OF
PRESIDENT ASSAD'S DEATH. SEELYE UNQUOTE. CHRISTOPHER

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